

From craftsman to gentlemen: Renaissance civilisation, the sociology of art and Elias

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FROM CRAFTSMAN TO GENTLEMAN

Renaissance civilisation, the sociology of art and Elias.

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The sociology of art did not mature like for instance the sociology of professions. Sociologists seem to be somewhat hesitant to deal with art. They tend to leave the subject to art historians. The article in the International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, "Art and society": "The Fine Arts", has been written by an art historian, Francis Haskell and the bibliography mainly contains art historical literature. However art historians tend to focus on the individual artist rather than on social relations. "Von einem der grossen Künstler des Abendlandes, einem der Menschen die ihm Licht gaben, soll dieses Buch handeln." Thus begins a monograph on the first artist who established himself as an individual and a gentleman, Giotto. "An artist of rare and exquisite gifts", thus starts a monograph on his most successful pupil. (1)

Art history and sociology

Art has got a history of its own. Art historians focus in a series of monographs on a sequence of distinguished artists and their masterpieces. In this new discipline Berenson became the first authority. Finding a group of paintings resembling both Ambrogio Lorenzetti and Ugolino di Nerio, but belonging to neither of them, he christened the artist behind these works Ugolino Lorenzetti.

In this perspective the Italian Renaissance begins with Giotto, the Northern Renaissance with the Van Eycks. These geniuses are followed by names found in documents and names invented by art historians. The activity of artists is related mainly to other artists, an approach resembling the modern concept of the Fine Arts as something free from social pressure and structural change.

Such an approach does not appeal to sociologists, in particular those familiar with the work of Norbert Elias. (2) Therefore I will shift the focus from the individual artist to changing relations between patrons and the painters they employed. Emphasising changing interdependences I hope to widen the scope of strictly sociological analyses and illustrate the fruitfulness of the approach Elias has developed. Integration of sociology, history and art history will in the end result in a better understanding of the present situation. (3)

Changes in the Profession of painter

Painters were dependent on their employers and their professional organisations, which provided rules for the interaction between patrons, painters and other members of the community. Membership of a guild was shared with other craftsmen, working with the same materials, like saddlers and carpenters. Painters were commissioned to decorate saddles, chests, armour, dress, ships, altarpieces and walls. Their status was equivalent to that of craftsmen and far inferior to that of their patrons, being gentlemen. (4)

From the end of the thirteenth century onwards, in France and Flanders slightly later than in Italy, a structural change took place in the status attainable for painters. Time and again they attained wealth, honor and fame.

From the community of craftsmen, receiving regularly their commissions from their social superiors, but otherwise devoid of any contact with the intellectual upper stratum, an artistic elite emerged, composed of appreciated painters and their patrons.

Big houses, high taxes, a good marriage, honorific offices, noble titles and a tomb in the church came into reach of painters like Giotto, the Van Eycks, Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, Michelangelo and later Rubens and Rembrandt. This however, was never attained without tension and conflicts with both guilds and patrons.

Changes in the pattern of patronage

The nature of this development already suggests an explanation.

Changes in the profession of painter coincide with profound changes in the pattern of patronage: a boom in large scale commissions for painted decorations in churches, palaces and townhalls.

These commissions were given by ecclesiastics, nobles and merchants, forming part of an increasingly complex pattern of families, guilds brotherhoods, religious orders, courts and city-states. (5)

The majority of these works, some still extant most only known by documents, were made for the emerging European elite, established in institutions, growing in complexity and scope. The painters, acquiring wealth and fame, worked for the richest bankers, the most powerful princess and the highest ecclesiastics. They were commissioned to decorate the enlarged or newly built churches,

palaces and townhalls, replacing the much smaller ones, constructed before the economic and demographic boom of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Paintings appeared to be both cheaper and quicker than mosaics, tapestries and sculpture. Moreover, they provided greater opportunities for rendering the desired images and new devices, like perspective and anatomy, were developed older solutions, scarcely used since antiquity, were given a new life.

A complex iconography was developed on the basis of the Bible, the Church Fathers and recently rediscovered texts from antiquity. New social experiences and old texts, written in comparable complex situations, were translated into a system of ideas about social life, values and norms. These were translated into an extending iconographic system and hence into painted images. Painting became the medium par excellence for conveying rules of behaviour, applying to greater numbers of interdependent people, governed by a civilized elite, established in churches, palaces and town halls. The elite commissioned the paintings for the enlarged institutions, where they were prominently placed.

Conveying normative rules was considered to be the chief function of art, as formulated by the council of Nicaea in the eighth century and repeated by that of Trente in the sixteenth. This idea was dispersed to an unprecedented extent in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. It was repeated over and over again that art taught in images, what the Bible and the Fathers, as well as recently canonized saints, taught in words. This became the consistent motive for the expanding patronage of the arts. (6)

The theory of the civilizing process and the problem of the Renaissance.

The correlation between changes in the social position of painters and changes in the pattern of patronage and the long term development of civilisation and stateformation, implies a new problem: Elias focusses, especially in part two, on the royal court of France, while the socio-genesis of the profession of painter mainly proceeds in Italy. How do these observations fit into the theory of civilisation?

Before suggesting an answer it is important to stress that Elias provides an explanation for a specific art historical problem which is superior to other explanations. As a contribution to the formulation of questions, to

the conceptualization and to the suggestion of hypotheses, it may be said to be of paradigmatic significance. This however not only implies confirmation, or clarification of the theory and its concepts but specification and correction as well. In particular the citystates deserve more than a footnote and the role of the Roman Curia more than a general reference to religion as a phenomenon related to civilisation. The important role of Italian authors, in part one and their social background - like Bonvicino da Riva, Giovanni della Casa, Castiglione and Machiavelli - already pointed into this direction.

So the relation between long term processes in what became Italy and France deserves a more thorough treatment, in order to integrate the long term civilizing trends in Italy into the framework of Elias' theory.

Since The twelfth century ideas, images and money, circulating in Italy found their way to France. Italian bankers financed French wars; Italian professors thought theology in Paris and the Italian city republics, dominated by merchants hired french nobles to fight for them. In both Italy and France civilisation and stateformation proceeded in a specific way, as regional specialisations within a larger configuration, only in the sixteenth century to be dominated by the French royal court, held in balance by the more far reaching spiritual influence of the Catholic Church, established in Rome. The increased interdependence between nobles, merchants and ecclesiastics resulted in a common lifestyle, outlook and patronage of the arts.

Painted images played an increasingly important role in the extending relations between the emerging civilized elite. These images conveyed the civilizing message of Jesus Christ, Aristotle, the Church Fathers and recently canonized saints. The images were placed in palaces, townhalls and particularly in churches. The high altar was the focal point of society and its decoration showed its dominant and values. The decoration was expected to teach both the literate and the illiterate what was virtuous and what was vicious, whose example one ought to follow and which behaviour one should avoid.

This need created favourable conditions for the rise of several professional groups, offering the demanded services, such as canonists, jurists, theologians, humanists and painters. These professions provided a path, even for people from humble origins to attain a high position in a changing society.

So a professional ideology was developed by these emerging groups, focussing on individual genius. This was used by art historians as a source and in that way the subject was monopolized by them. Sociologists were eager to study any profession - from managers and chemists to waiters, bargeman, prostitutes and poolhustlers - but painters. Thus was created an image of the Zivilisation des Abendlandes, so much different from what sociologists would have done and Elias did.

Notes.

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